

The Language of the Banquet: Reconsidering Paolo Veronese's *Wedding at Cana*

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British filmmaker Peter Greenaway's video installation during the 2009 Venice Biennale took Paolo Veronese's *Wedding at Cana* (1562-63) as its subject.¹ The installation, based on a digital reproduction of the painting recently placed in its original home of the San Giorgio refectory, used multiple screens as well as digital and audio effects to dissect the work's formal structures, highlight specific characters in the scene, and create dramatic effects with music and imagined conversations. Greenaway, in line with the scores of admiring artists preceding him, chose to highlight the more worldly aspects of the work: the gossip amongst guests, worries of servants about food supplies, and soaring music. The continued popularity of this sixteenth century painting clearly indicates that Veronese's work has the ability to speak to viewers in the twenty-first century as well as its original Renaissance audience [Figure 1]. Two years after Paolo Veronese (1528-88) completed the *Wedding at Cana* for the refectory of the monastery San Giorgio Maggiore, resident monk Benedetto Guidi recorded his admiration for the work in effusive, poetic verse.² Specifically, he noted that "[a]ll the sculptors come and the painters to admire it three, four, and six times . . . and PAOLO [*sic.*] is praised with eternal fame."³ This poem stands among the earliest of scores of accolades that the *Wedding at Cana* has garnered and emphasizes the

¹ Greenaway's multimedia installation at the original refectory of San Giorgio Maggiore (now the Fondazione Giorgio Cini) took place June 6-September 13, 2009 as part of the 2009 Venice Biennale. It forms part of a series of installations and films that re-imagine canonical paintings of Western art. See Greenaway's website: <http://www.petergreenaway.info/content/view/138/1>. See also: Alessio Antonini, "Così Greenaway fa rinascere «Le Nozze di Cana,»" in *Corriere della Sera* (June 2, 2009), http://corrieredelveneto.corriere.it/notizie/cultura_e_tempolibero/2009/2-giugno-2009/cosi-greenaway-fa-rinascere-le-nozze-cana-1501421042205.shtml, and Roberta Smith, "Peter Greenaway Takes Veronese's Figures Out to Play," in *New York Times* (July 21, 2009), <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/06/22/arts/design/22greenaway.html>. A short video of the installation can be found on YouTube: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CB2_msTGvg.

² The work is now housed in the Louvre and underwent a major restoration in 1992. See the catalog for the restoration: *Les Noces de Cana de Véronèse: Une oeuvre et sa restauration*, ed. Jean Habert (Paris: Éditions de la Réunion des musées nationaux, 1992).

³ Qtd. in Richard Cocke, *Paolo Veronese: Piety and Display in an Age of Religious Reform* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2001), 173.

painting's numerous visitors, indicating that its audience extended far outside the brotherhood of the monastery. Veronese's technical mastery and sumptuous detail effectively merge opposites—framing religious meaning with a most secular and lavish display—and he does so via what I am calling a “language of the banquet,” which would have been both legible and meaningful for sixteenth century audiences. I propose a reading of the painting that focuses on its sixteenth century creator, original location, and intended viewers, emphasizing the social forces that shaped their understanding of the politics and power of food, wine, and banqueting.

Depicting a biblical tale of Christ turning water into wine at a wedding, the large-scale painting imagines the scene in sixteenth century Venice. In the lower half of the composition, finely dressed guests chat, gesture, and eat at a banquet table attended by servers, entertainers, and musicians, while the miraculous wine is served at the far left and examined at the far right. Elevated on a second level, busily working servers, carvers, and cooks attend to the food and dishes for the meal. Above them, a cloudy blue sky is flanked with classicizing columns and architecture, with several spectators peering down at the activity below. The rich and varied colors and attention to the detail of costly goods—clothing, instruments, and serving vessels—give the work a distinctly sumptuous execution. Rather than interpreting the painting solely through symbolic means or as a window into Venetian aristocratic excess, I contend that Veronese's work must be understood through the subtleties of banqueting rituals as it unites seemingly contradictory themes of ostentation and modesty. I will analyze the ways that the details of the painting ultimately conveyed an impressive image of religious and secular power to both monastic and lay audiences. My investigation first focuses on the painting's original placement in the dining hall of the monastery and its symbiotic yet contrasting architectural framework. I will then evaluate this particular moment in Italian culinary history, exploring contemporary banqueting and dietary texts, and arguing that Veronese's arrangement of figures in the composition communicated the rising professionalization of culinary and service officials and exploited deeply held cultural beliefs about the nature of banqueting, food, health, and power.

The refectory of San Giorgio Maggiore is both classicizing and austere, contrasting greatly with the active and colorful composition of Veronese's work. In the sixteenth century, a vestibule with a large door and set of stairs led to a narrow antechamber, where two marble

lavabos flanked the door to the refectory.⁴ Inside the refectory, the design and decoration of the space was a collaboration between artist and architect.⁵ The Benedictine monks of the wealthy Venetian monastery commissioned Veronese to paint the wall of their refectory as part of a program of overall renovation and rebuilding. This was an important task, as the island monastery was one of the most storied in Venice, containing the relics of St. Stephen and operating independently from the Bishop of Venice.⁶ San Giorgio Maggiore was also a major part of the local festive life, and its processions were often among the famous of those described by Venetian writers.⁷ In order to expand and update its facilities, the monastery underwent a series of renovations in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Andrea Palladio (1508-80) was appointed in 1559 to complete the refectory, and Veronese was commissioned soon after, in 1562.⁸ Veronese was both a prestigious and familiar choice, as he had gained a certain degree of fame in Venice and had previously worked with Palladio.⁹ The surviving contract offers rare insight into the particulars of the commission, and traces the balance of creative force between artist and patron. Three monks signed the contract, which specified the subject matter: “the history of the banquet of Christ’s miracle at Cana in Galilee, creating the number of figures that can be fully accommodated.”¹⁰ Veronese was to fill the allotted space, work with

⁴ Peter Lauritzen, “The Architectural History of San Giorgio,” in *Apollo* (1976), 8.

⁵ See: <http://www.factum-arte.com/eng/conservacion/cana/default.asp> for images of a 2006-07 project to scan the painting, creating a digital reproduction that was installed in the refectory of San Giorgio Maggiore in Venice.

⁶ It was named San Giorgio Maggiore to distinguish it from San Giorgio in Alega, another Benedictine monastery. Lauritzen, “The Architectural History of San Giorgio,” 4-11; see: n. 1.

⁷ Irina Smirnova, “Le Cene Veronese: Problemi Iconografici,” in *Nuovi studi su Paolo Veronese*, ed. Massimo Gemin (Venezia: Arsenale Editrice, 1990), 361.

⁸ Tracy Cooper, “Un modo per ‘la Riforma Cattolica’? La scelta di Paolo Veronese per il refettorio di San Giorgio Maggiore,” in *Crisi e rinnovamenti nell’autunno del Rinascimento a Venezia*, eds. Vittore Branca and Carlo Ossola (Florence, 1991), 272, 283-88. Art historian Tracy Cooper believes that the selection of Veronese was largely due the fact that he and Palladio had already worked together, at the Villa Barbaro at Maser. She also cites his *Feast in the House of Simon*, for the Benedictine refectory at Santi Nazaro e Celso in Verona, 1556, as a potential influence on the commission. Veronese had already worked with the Benedictines, but he had also shown his capability to handle large-scale feast scenes.

⁹ Jean Habert, “Il restauro delle ‘Nozze di Cana’ di Veronese: qualche osservazione,” in *Arte Veneta* 44 (1993), 88.

¹⁰ The monks were: Girolamo Scrocchetto (abbot from 1551-64, who oversaw this phase of rebuilding), Father Alessandro da Bergamo, and the cellarer Maurizio da Bergamo. Habert, “Il restauro delle ‘Nozze di Cana’ di Veronese: qualche osservazione,” 89-90. “. . . la istoria della Cena del miracolo fatto da Cristo in Cana di Galilea, facendo quella quantita di figure che le potra intar acomodamente. . .”

the most costly and precious pigments, and complete the work for the “festa de la madona” in September 1563.¹¹

Palladio’s design for the refectory, featuring a cornice, barrel and groin vaults, and rectangular windows, created a fitting frame for the *Wedding at Cana*, which completely covered the back wall and was placed above the head table of the abbot.¹² While Veronese’s work offered a marked contrast to the simple lines of the room, the actual and illusionistic architectural elements created the impression that the painting was in fact an extension of the space of the refectory.¹³ The cornice provided a framing device for the top of Veronese’s work, which was unusual as he typically painted his own structure in similar scenes. This seemingly harmonious relationship between painting and architecture is of particular significance when we consider the function of the space itself. The refectory served as the dining room for the monks and, according to the Rule of St. Benedict, was where the monks would eat in silence and contemplate oral presentations of religious readings. The Benedictine Rule states: “But as for buffoonery and talk that is in vain and stirs to laughter, we condemn such things everywhere with a perpetual ban, and forbid the disciple to open his mouth for such conversation.”¹⁴ At mealtime, it dictated that there should be complete silence, except for readings and the words of “the superior . . . [who] may say a few words for the edification of the brethren.”¹⁵ Therefore, if the Rule was followed appropriately, the silence of the meal would not be broken, even by asking for more food, as such a “thing [should] be asked for by means of some sign rather than by speech.”¹⁶ Above the entrance, inside the refectory, Veronese painted two angels which, although now lost, are said to have held a card inscribed “SILENTIUM.”¹⁷ Thus, Veronese’s angels indicating silence in preparation for the meal and reading were especially appropriate for the monastic viewers; they also serve as a revealing contrast to his dynamic painting within, that pictorially evoked the noise of music and conversation.

¹¹ Cooper, 273. He received 324 ducats, a barrel of wine, and food in the refectory in which he was at work. An English translation of the commission can be found in David Chambers, Brian Pullan, and Jennifer Fletcher, *Venice: A Documentary History, 1450-1630* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1992).

¹² Lauritzen, 8.

¹³ Lauritzen, 9.

¹⁴ Ambrose G. Wathen, *Silence: The Meaning of Silence in the Rule of St. Benedict* (Washington, DC: Consortium Press, Cistercian Publication, 1973), 25.

¹⁵ Wathen, 46-7.

¹⁶ Wathen, 46.

¹⁷ Habert, “Il restauro delle ‘Nozze di Cana’ di Veronese: qualche osservazione,” 88-97. See also note 3 on page 88, which describes two angels that Paolo painted.

The monastery's choice of this sumptuously executed scene is initially somewhat puzzling; however, an investigation of previous refectory scenes and the commission for the work will show that the painting's iconography was in fact typical for a refectory setting. Creighton Gilbert has analyzed fifteenth century depictions of the Last Supper and their functions in refectories, relating them to Crucifixion scenes of the fourteenth century, and positing that they essentially served the same function: to symbolize the Eucharist, but in "everyday" rather than sacramental terms.¹⁸ He writes: "the function of the painting is to give us a tool to imitate and resemble Christ and thereby to become virtuous, and the empirical realism of the paintings help in this aim."¹⁹ At the time of the commission, the custom of adorning refectories with large-scale feast scenes was common in Italy, going back to the fifteenth century in Tuscany. Leonardo da Vinci famously brought the genre to Milan in 1495, but Venice did not see such scenes until the middle of the sixteenth century.²⁰ Veronese's *Feast in the House of Simon* introduced this theme to Venetian refectories (1556-60), while Tintoretto further popularized the subject with his *Marriage at Cana* in 1561.²¹ The next decade or so saw numerous feast scenes produced for Venetian refectories by Veronese, Titian, Tintoretto, and the Bassano workshop.²² Following Gilbert's model, the Venetian feast scenes are a part of the refectory tradition rather than a drastic break with it.

¹⁸ Creighton Gilbert, "Last Suppers and Their Refectories," in *The Pursuit of Holiness in Late Medieval and Renaissance Religion*, eds. Charles Trinkhaus and Heiko A. Oberman (Leiden: Brill, 1974), 371-402. See also: Carolin C. Young, "Depictions of the Last Supper," in *Food in the Arts: Proceedings of the Oxford Symposium on Food and Cookery 1998*, ed. Harlan Walker (Totnes: Prospect Books, 1998), 223-236.

¹⁹ Gilbert, 387.

²⁰ William R. Rearick, "Ad mensam," in *The Feast in the House of Simon: Veronese, History and Restoration of a Masterpiece* (Paris: Alain de Gourcuff, 1997), 43. For an exploration of the culinary context of Leonardo's work, see: John Varriano, "At Supper with Leonardo," in *Gastronomica* 8:1 (Winter 2008), 75-79. See also Varriano's extended treatment of food and art in Renaissance Italy, *Tastes and Temptations: Food and Art in Renaissance Italy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009).

²¹ Cocke, *Paolo Veronese: Piety and Display in an Age of Religious Reform*, 173. Cocke points to Francesco Salviati's *Marriage at Cana* as an important model for Veronese, a painting commissioned for the refectory of S. Salvatore in Rome. Salviati's work was completed by 1555 and Cocke argues that it has much in common with Veronese's San Giorgio canvas.

²² Veronese's subsequent undertaking would be another version of the *Feast in the House of Simon*, completed for the San Sebastiano refectory in 1570, but it was a later work that perhaps brought him the most fame—or infamy. In 1573, Veronese painted a Last Supper scene (later renamed *Feast in the House of Levi*) for the refectory of SS. Giovanni e Paolo in Venice, but was called before the Inquisition for its perceived heretical subject matter. On the trial, see: Philipp Fehl, "Veronese and the Inquisition: A Study in the Subject Matter of the So-Called Feast in the House of Levi," in *Gazette des Beaux-Arts* 58 (1961), 348-54. For a compelling re-assessment of the issues raised by the trial, see: John Jeffries Martin, *Myths of Renaissance Individualism* (New York: Plgrave Macmillan, 2004).

Despite its location in a monastic cloister, monks were not the only viewers of the work; the monastery also hosted guests, and soon the fame of Veronese's work brought visitors from all across Europe.²³ As stated in Guidi's verses, painters and sculptors visited in considerable numbers to admire and copy the painting. Further evincing the popularity of this painting, travel books and guides to Venice listed the work in their itineraries.²⁴ The Benedictine monastery provided hospitality to many visitors (which perhaps prompted the renovations of its buildings in the sixteenth century) and, therefore, the viewers of the painting were not only monks but also painters and aristocratic guests.²⁵ As such, the painting was meant to not only inspire devotion but also to assert the power and wealth of the monastery—and Veronese satisfied these requirements with a careful balance of composition and meaning created by his engagement with practices of eating and drinking. The *San Giorgio Wedding at Cana* indeed symbolizes and prefigures the Eucharistic meal, and does so in the terms that would be familiar to both the noble guests and the monks. However, Gilbert's phrase "empirical realism" does not accurately capture the nuances of Veronese's work. Rather than a realistic depiction, Veronese constructs a highly artificial scene that conveyed religious meaning through the specific deployment of markers of realism related to banqueting and eating.

The biblical origin of the Cana story is found in John 2:1-11. In these verses, Christ attends a wedding where the host's supply of wine is depleted:

[7] Jesus said to them, "Fill the jars with water." And they filled them up to the brim. [8] He said to them, "Now draw some out, and take it to the steward of the feast." So they took it. [9] When the steward of the feast tasted the water now become wine, and did not know where it came from (though the servants who had drawn the water knew), the steward of the feast called the bridegroom [10] and said to him, "Every man serves the good wine first; and when men have drunk freely, then the poor wine; but

The famous documents of this trial record Veronese defending the "profane" subject matter in his work, which included potentially objectionable figures such as dwarves and soldiers. However, I believe that interpretations of the *Wedding at Cana* have been overly colored by this trial (which occurred ten years later) and I consider the San Giorgio work in its own historical moment. The Council of Trent had just ended the same year that Veronese completed the work, in 1563, thus setting its creation in a Venice of a more tolerant religious tenor.

²³ Andreas Prieuer, *Paolo Caliari, called Veronese: 1528-1588*, trans. Paul Aston and Fiona Hulse (Cologne: Konemann, 2000), 81. The monastery eventually closed the refectory to visitors in 1705, as the disruptions were becoming too frequent.

²⁴ Pierre Rosenberg, "A Proposito delle 'Nozze di Cana' di Veronese," in *Arte Veneta* 44 (1993), 86.

²⁵ Cooper, 290.

you have kept the good wine until now.” [11] This, the first of his signs, Jesus did at Cana in Galilee, and manifested his glory; and his disciples believed in him.

Veronese shows the moment at which the servants and wine steward of the feast are pouring and examining the miraculous wine on the far right of the painting, and presenting it to the bridegroom on the far left. In the biblical text, and seemingly in the painting, the only figures privy to the miracle are the servers—the guests remain unaware of the extraordinary origin of the wine. This emphasis on domestic service officials parallels changes in their profession during Veronese’s lifetime.

Art historian Philipp Fehl has explored an alternative source text for the inspiration of the depicted scene: Aretino’s *Humanity of Christ* (Venice, 1535). Fehl claims that Veronese not only based the work on his interpretation of the tale, but also included a portrait of Aretino on the left side of the work in homage. Indeed, Aretino’s text more directly captures the earthly pageantry of the painting:

In those days in Cana of Galilee they were celebrating a wedding where with royal pomp there appeared the most distinguished, noblest, and most elegant persons in the city. . . . The tables were laden with elaborate vessels of pure gold and silver.

He said: “Draw forth now and bear unto the governor of the feast.” And they drew it and took it to the head steward. As he smelled the bouquet of wine which was made from grapes gathered in the vineyards of Heaven he was revived like a man who awakens from a faint when his wrists are bathed in vinegar. Tasting the wine he felt the trickle of its sharp sweetness down to his very toes. In filling a glass of crystal, one could have sworn it was bubbling with distilled rubies.²⁶

To be sure, these sensual descriptions seem apropos to Veronese’s work, and he filled the monumental canvas with equally lavish details of this banquet—such as the delicate glassware, shimmering gold and silver plates, and ornate costumes—all of which circulate around the primary axis of the work, with Christ at its center.

The Venetian Renaissance in particular was characterized by an influx of the consumption of extravagant goods, and thus the material luxury of the painting would have had specific meaning for

²⁶ Qtd. in Philipp Fehl, “Veronese’s Decorum: Notes on the Marriage at Cana,” in *Art in the Ape of Nature: Studies in Honor of H.W. Janson*, ed. Barasch Moseed (New York: Abrams; Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1981), 345-6.

local audiences.²⁷ As Francesco Sansovino, a Venetian writer, described patrician homes in 1581: “the dressers displaying silverware, porcelain, pewter and brass or damascene bronze are innumerable.”²⁸ Veronese’s painting is a showpiece of luxury items, from the massive display of silver and gold plates to the sparkling wine glasses to the whimsically carved stone jugs. In Venice, increasing instabilities within the patriciate only encouraged the myth of opulence as a tool for disguising reality.²⁹ However, governmental concern for the excesses flaunted in clothing and entertainment continuously manifested itself throughout the sixteenth century through sumptuary legislation. This type of legislation can be traced back to the thirteenth century and was updated and revised frequently. In 1562, the Senate passed a new set of comprehensive sumptuary laws on women’s clothing, room decoration, and banquet fare:

. . . at nuptial feasts, at banquets for public and private parties, and indeed at any meal of meat, not more than one course of roast and one of boiled meat may be provided. . . . Banned from all banquets shall be trout from any place whatsoever, sturgeon, fish from the lake, pasties, confections and all other things made of sugar. . . . Oysters may be served only at private meals for twenty persons or less, and not at larger banquets or feasts; collations must be provided in the rooms, on the tables, and not otherwise, they must consist of modest confections, of the ordinary products of pastry cooks, and of simple fruits of any kind, according to the time of year.³⁰

It seems that the table was one area of public display that might have followed the sumptuary laws more closely, since severe penalties were levied on cooks, stewards, and tailors whose services would have allowed wealthy families to flout the sumptuary laws.³¹ Veronese’s feast seems to offer a nod to this stipulation, as the food depicted on the table is relatively austere and falls under these dictates. However harshly intended the laws were, they were rarely followed, and many families considered it a point of pride to disregard the regulations. The knowledge of this legislation pertains

²⁷ Patricia Fortini Brown, “Behind the Walls: The Material Culture of Venetian Elites,” in *Venice Reconsidered: The History and Civilization of an Italian City-State, 1297-1797*, ed. John Martin and Dennis Romano (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), 295.

²⁸ Qtd. in Brown, “Behind the Walls: The Material Culture of Venetian Elites,” 296.

²⁹ Brown, “Behind the Walls: The Material Culture of Venetian Elites,” 297-8.

³⁰ Qtd. in *Venice: A Documentary History, 1450-1630*, eds. David Chambers and Brian Pullan (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1992), 24.

³¹ Brown, “Behind the Walls: The Material Culture of Venetian Elites,” 326.

to both the aristocratic guests and monks viewing this work. The monastery's commission of this particular painting acknowledges the social powers of banqueting rituals and material culture, and exploits their painted iterations to attest to both the earthly power of the monastery and Christ's divine deeds.

Veronese captured Christ's transformation of water into wine on an epic scale and in a manner that appealed to both a necessary sense of decorum as well as a desire for lavish feasting, linking his depiction of a divine miracle to the everyday world of sixteenth century viewers. He divided the banquet scene into two planes of activity, placing the guests, servants, and religious figures below a balustrade, while situating other servants, architectural features, and the sky above it. A U-shaped table, elevated on a pedestal, fills the lower part of the composition. There are four female and twenty-one male guests seated at the table. At the far left sit the bride and groom, elegantly attired in sixteenth century Venetian clothing, while at the middle of the table Christ, Mary, and several disciples are prominent due to their more subdued attire.³² At the center of the table, attending servers, along with several jesters and four musicians, gesture and pose as they attend to their duties. On the right side are more guests, including a monk, who converse at the table.³³ Flanking the scene on either side are pink marble colonnades and stairs leading to the balustrade and upper plane of the canvas, which is dominated by the activities of the servants. At the left, they busily sort silver and gold plates and vessels, and in the center a carver prepares meat while other servants ferry the meat to and from the carver along the right side. The entire top half of the work is almost completely filled by a serene blue sky, framed with columns and balconies with spectators observing the dense activity in the lower half of the composition. Veronese's guests and servants seem to swirl around Christ and Mary, whose serene poses and gestures function as a quiet epicenter of the work. Veronese, who was given license by the commission to fill the canvas with as many figures as he deemed

³² The costumes display a noteworthy range of both historical and decorative elements—from the contemporary fashions, to exotic costumes *alla turca*, to the simplified garments of the religious figures. Patricia Fortini Brown noted that the variety of costume served a purpose similar to the inclusion of other contemporary details: "To Venetian eyes it would not have trivialized a religious mystery. Rather it ennobled it and imbued it with a meaning that was both timeless and also specific to the times." Patricia Fortini Brown, *Private Lives in Renaissance Venice* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2004), 106.

³³ In the eighteenth century, several identifications of the guests were made; however, as these remain unverified, I have chosen not to consider them for this article. See: Remigio Marini, *L'Opera completa del Veronese* (Milano: Rizzoli Editore, 1968).

necessary, crowded the lower half of the composition with activity while leaving the upper half more tranquil—perhaps to flaunt the costly pigments such as ultramarine that the monks requested. The dynamic yet orderly composition offers an overall frame for Veronese to merge restraint and excess.

In sixteenth century Venice, banquets and weddings served as primary vehicles for the articulation of both political and social power. Held in honor of visiting dignitaries, for coronations, festivals, and weddings, public and private banquets were a vital aspect of Venetian society. The banquet was a social function and ceremony as well as a fundamentally performative act—with the hosts, guests, and servants each enacting a set of rituals that attempted to confirm and advance their own social position. The specific details of the banquet—food, music, wine, tableware—all transformed the necessary task of the consumption of food into an aesthetic and ritualized experience.³⁴ Therefore, banqueting protocol came heavily loaded with symbolism and social meaning and it is clear that Veronese understood the highly subtle language of the banquet by his adept handling of its details. Historian Ken Albala indicates that, “[t]o a courtier, magnificent banquet dishes not only signify wealth, power, and sophistication but transfer those properties directly into the individual diner. An exquisite dish makes the diner exquisite.”³⁵

The guests at the wedding sit before dishes of the final course: quince, grapes, dates, and sweetmeats.³⁶ They are attired in finely detailed, sumptuous clothing and lean towards one another to gesture and converse. In his *Book of the Courtier* (Venice, 1528), Baldassare Castiglione emphasized that “the courtier has to imbue with grace his movements, his gestures, his way of doing things and

³⁴ Alberto Capatti and Massimo Montanari, *Italian Cuisine: A Cultural History*, trans. Aine O’Healy (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 133. On the topic of banqueting, see: Ken Albala, *The Banquet: Dining in the Great Courts of Late Renaissance Europe* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2007); Claudio Benporat, *Feste e banchetti: Convivialità Italiana fra tre e quattrocento* (Florence: L.S. Olschki, 2001); Michel Jeanneret, *A Feast of Words: Banquets and Table Talk in the Renaissance*, trans. Jeremy Whiteley and Emma Hughes (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987); Roy Strong, *Art and Power: Renaissance Festivals, 1450-1650* (Woodbridge, Suffolk: Boydell Press, 1984); Roy Strong, *Feast: A History of Grand Eating* (London: Harcourt, Inc., 2002); and Valerie Taylor, “Banquet Plate and Renaissance Culture: A Day in the Life,” *Renaissance Studies* 19:5 (2005).

³⁵ Ken Albala, *Eating Right in the Renaissance* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2002), 184.

³⁶ Gillian Riley, *The Oxford Companion to Italian Food* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 570-572.

in short, his every action."³⁷ The guests at the banquet each "perform" an elegant motion in this constructed language of *sprezzatura*, or easy grace: using toothpicks, demonstrating forks, cutting food, tucking in napkins, or conversing. Not one figure is shown lifting even a morsel of food to her or his lips (a "crude" gesture reserved for satirical genre depictions of peasants), and even the toothpick-user performs her picking with a closed mouth.³⁸ Certainly the patrician, lay audience might have recognized (or imagined) themselves as the guests at the banquet, but the monastic audiences would have also identified with the depicted dining rituals. Though consumed in quiet, most monastic diets closely resembled those of the courts in their quality and quantity. In fact, contemporary dietary treatises more often warned the priesthood of the dangers of gluttony and excess than starvation.³⁹ Certainly, a wealthy and aristocratic monastery such as San Giorgio Maggiore would not suffer from overly austere meals. Like their diet, in this moment of sixteenth century Venice, the monks' lives did resemble the aristocratic world in many ways and thus Veronese's painting had to engage both audiences.

Veronese's painting emphasizes the skill of the banquet officials and servants, and places them at important points in the composition: the grouping of the steward (in green), the wine steward (in white), and Christ forms a triangular locus. The servants and stewards in the scene outnumber the guests that they serve by a ratio of nearly two to one, and this emphasis connects them to their central function in the biblical narrative. When Christ turns the water into wine, the servants are both the vehicles and recipients of his miracle, as he commands them to fill the water pots, and then draw the wine out of them. This action is placed in the right foreground of the painting—a server dressed in gold is shown in the act of pouring wine out of a stone water jug as the wine steward examines the miraculous substance. They are elegantly attired, underscoring the fact that such positions were politically and socially significant, often held by high-ranking courtiers. In courts and monasteries, kitchen

³⁷ Qtd. in Ronnie Mirkin, "Performing Selfhood: The Costumed Body as a Site of Meditation Between Life, Art and Theatre in the English Renaissance," in *Body Dressing*, eds. Joanne Entwistle and Elizabeth Wilson (Oxford: Berg, 2001), 155.

³⁸ This emphasized the Renaissance rhetoric of "closed bodies" over consuming, grotesque bodies in the terms of Mikhail Bakhtin. Bakhtin characterized the open, carnivalesque bodies in contrast to upper class bodies, sealed against outside dangers and toxins. See: Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Helene Iswolsky (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1968), 303-67.

³⁹ Albala, *Eating Right in the Renaissance*, 213.

staffs were hierarchically organized, and a successful body of literature emerged in the sixteenth century to provide guidelines and instructions for these highly ritualized positions.⁴⁰ Such persons were to be highly trained in the varying and extensive skills needed to properly manage a courtly household and kitchen, and previously had relied on apprenticeships or training by their superiors. These books on cookery, household management, banquet preparation, foodstuffs, and diets were extremely popular, enjoying decades of reprints and widespread circulation, and had a large audience far outside the kitchen. The publication of detailed treatises written by high-ranking household courtiers—*cuochi*, *scalchi*, and *trincianti* (cooks, stewards, and carvers)—paralleled the elevation of other professionals, both evincing and contributing to the rising status of these new-found masters. The texts are richly evocative and sometimes illustrated, describing in word and image a culture of conspicuous consumption through lavish descriptions of banquets, recipes for elaborate dishes, or images of costly kitchen tools. The authors use specific rhetorical devices that construct their identities as both noble and skilled, fit for ensuring the safety and pleasure of royal and aristocratic courts.⁴¹ 1562, the year that Veronese began work on the painting, served as a particular moment when the publication of this specialized literature was gathering steam—and was only seven years before Bartolomeo Scappi would publish his quasi-definitive treatise.⁴²

A most prominent early example in print is *On Right Pleasure and Good Health*, whose author Platina, or Bartolomeo Sacchi (1421-81), was a Vatican librarian.⁴³ The work, initially published around 1470, enjoyed great popularity and multiple reprints, although its rich recipes were later dismissed by dieticians.⁴⁴ It is among the first

⁴⁰ For an introductory gathering of excerpts of the culinary texts, see: Emilio Faccioli, *Arte della cucina: Libri di ricette* (Milano: Il Polifilo, 1966). See also: the introductory text in Terence Scully's translation of Bartolomeo Scappi's *Opera*. Terence Scully, *The Opera of Bartolomeo Scappi: L'arte et prudenza d'un maestro Cuoco* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008), 3-87.

⁴¹ John Jeffries Martin, *Myths of Renaissance Individualism* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004); Stephen Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984).

⁴² Bartolomeo Scappi, *Opera* (Venice, 1570; reprinted, Bologna: Arnaldo Forni, 1981). English translation: Scully, 2008.

⁴³ See: Platina, *Platina's on Right Pleasure and Good Health: A Renaissance Gentleman's Discourse on Food, Health, and the Physical Pleasures*, abridged edition, ed. Mary Ella Milham, trans. Mary Ella Milham (Asheville, NC: Pegasus Press, 1999); Platina, *Platina, on Right Pleasure and Good Health: A Critical Edition and Translation of De Honesta Voluptate Et Valetudine*, trans. Mary Ella Milham (Tempe, AZ: Medieval & Renaissance Texts & Studies, 1998); and Platina, *De honesta voluptate et valetudine*, Mss. 1475 (reprinted, Udine: Società filologica friulana, 1994).

⁴⁴ Alcala, *Eating Right in the Renaissance*, 27.

to establish the “art” of eating pleasantly and aesthetically and is a foundational humanist work, articulating learned culinary philosophies to establish a new genre of literature.⁴⁵ Platina’s work draws upon both the work of ancient philosophers (Epicurus, Apicius, and Pliny) as well as his contemporary Maestro Martino.⁴⁶ In alluding to Epicurean philosophy, Platina attempts to relate Christian values of balance and well-being with pleasure, creating a humanist model for food and diet.⁴⁷

The genre of the culinary how-to further blossomed in the sixteenth century, solidifying the skill, knowledge, and artistry required of the cooks and servers that Veronese depicted in such great detail. Cristoforo di Messisbugo, steward of the Este in Ferrara, completed *Banchetti compositioni di vivande, et apparecchio general* in 1549, with instructions on the materials needed to prepare elaborate meals, a listing of banquets that he had orchestrated, and around 300 recipes.⁴⁸ Messisbugo’s work was one of the first to be illustrated with woodcuts that demonstrate stewards and cooks at work in scenes of cooking and banqueting [Figure 2]. After Messisbugo, Domenico Romoli’s *La singolare dottrina* (1560) is indicative of the multifaceted nature of culinary treatises: it explains the responsibilities of the household staff, catalogs groups of foods with their natural humors, and offers recipes on how to prepare them.⁴⁹ Romoli, nicknamed *Il Panunto* (“oiled bread”), covers a variety of topics: tasks and behaviors of household professionals, seasons of meat and fishes, menus organized by month, recipes, exercise, as well as herbs, beans, fruits, and their properties. “I sometimes ponder how very important an individual is who is a personal officer of noble Princes since in the face of so many dangers they place their life in his hands,” he writes,

⁴⁵ Platina, *Platina’s on Right Pleasure and Good Health: A Renaissance Gentleman’s Discourse on Food, Health, and the Physical Pleasures*, xxxii; Simon Varey, “Medieval and Renaissance Italy, the Peninsula,” in *Regional Cuisines of Medieval Europe: A Book of Essays*, ed. Melitta Weiss Adamson (New York and London: Routledge, 2002).

⁴⁶ Maestro Martino’s *Il Libro de arte coquinaria* is identified by many scholars, most recently Luigi Ballerini, as a foundation for Platina’s work and all subsequent Italian cooking. Martino, *The Art of Cooking: The First Modern Cookery Book*, ed. Luigi Ballerini, trans. Jeremy Parzen (Berkeley, London: University of California Press, 2005), 2. Maestro Martino, *Libro de arte coquinaria*, Mss. 1450-60 (reprinted, Milan: Terziaria, 1990, and Udine: Società Filologica Friulana and Arti Grafiche Friulane, 1994).

⁴⁷ Martino, *The Art of Cooking*, 24. Martino’s work exists only in manuscript form (thought to be completed in the mid-fifteenth century), and thus the dissemination of its recipes occurred through Platina and others. However, it functioned as a pivotal moment in dietary literature. According to Ballerini, its most important contribution was the establishment of a “gastronomic lexicon.”

⁴⁸ Capatti and Montanari, 16. Messisbugo is noted as one of the first cooks of elevated status, and he was employed as both cook and steward for the Este court.

⁴⁹ Domenico Romoli, *La singolare dottrina* (Venice: Michele Tramezzino, 1560).

clearly expressing the growing sense of professionalization and pride amongst household officials.⁵⁰

The steward, or *lo scalco*, was the banquet's principal organizer, who controlled all aspects of the event: food, wine, service, and tableware. In the *Wedding at Cana*, he is shown to the left of the musicians, dressed in green. The steward oversaw the production of food and the techniques of its presentation, supervising the cook, carver, and wine steward (in white). While the steward ultimately chose the wines and their order of presentation, he delegated their distribution to the wine steward and his assistants. The responsibilities of the wine steward involved storing, decanting, tasting, and adjusting the wine (and water), and finally dispatching wine servers to deliver it to the table. Overall, the meal was the opportunity for these service personnel to display their virtuosity, and by extension, the refinement, generosity, and stature of their patron.

The depiction of the biblical miracle reinforces dietary customs and beliefs of Veronese's time and employs specific details to underscore the value of Christ's miracle. Veronese's banquet, according to sixteenth century practice, was carefully balanced, reflecting the care and skill of the unseen cooks. While the food on the table seems less prominent than the displays of architectural and sartorial excess, it is nevertheless worthy of consideration. While numerous courses would have preceded this moment, the diners are eating the last one of fruit and nuts. The depiction of this final course evokes a sense of relative modesty while alluding to the previously consumed (and presumably abundant) dishes of meats, fish, pastries, and vegetables. According to Platina, the proper way to close a meal was often with fruits and nuts, accompanied by wine to help "seal" the stomach.⁵¹ The balance of food and wines was essential for proper health in the prominent medical discourses of sixteenth century Italy. The positive effects created by the miraculous wine were therefore not merely for pleasure or merriment, but also perceived as necessary for good health and balance. Veronese's wine is appropriately red: in keeping with the recommendations provided by sixteenth century writers, the wines were to progress from the lightest white to the strongest, darkest red at the end of the meal.⁵² Different types of wines were considered essential to good health and treatises devoted

⁵⁰ Qtd. in Scully, 663. Text from Domenico Romoli, *La singolar dottrina* (Venice: Gio. Battista Bonfadino, 1593).

⁵¹ Capatti and Montanari, 126.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 139.

to them covered the entirety of their production and consumption, compiling agricultural, chemical, and medicinal discourses.⁵³

Popular and learned dietary beliefs were based on Galen's writings from the second century A.D.; in turn, Galenic belief was based in humoral physiology: the notion that good health could only come from a balance of four humors: blood, choler, phlegm, and bile. Each humor had a unique combination of hot, cold, moist, and dry properties, and proper health could only be obtained through suitable humoral balance. In turn, each person's individual complexion was comprised of an arrangement of these humors, and diet was used as a medical tool to correct imbalances. Additionally, digestion was thought to be a process of "cooking" foods in the stomach, thus, all that entered the body had to be "corrected" in order to facilitate proper cooking.⁵⁴ The miracle of turning water into wine was therefore also a metaphor for health for the Renaissance audience, as the consumption of the final course without wine would lead to indigestion and the dreaded imbalance of humors that caused illness. The painting alludes to contemporary beliefs regarding the medicinal properties of wine, as well as its social necessity, in order to highlight the magnitude of the miraculous transformation.

As the painting marks a specific moment in Italian culinary history, along with a distinctly transitional one for the education and self-promotion of cooks, stewards, and carvers, the arrangement of key figures in Veronese's composition offers additional implications for notions of reserve and ostentation, creativity and control. In the upper middle plane of the work, above the balustrade and Christ's head, a carver busily chops lamb. This seemingly anachronistic event (as the guests are simultaneously eating dessert) is typically explained by the fact that it serves as an allusion to Christ's crucifixion. David Rosand has argued that a central axis of the carver, Christ's head, and an hourglass (on the musicians' table) alludes to

⁵³ See "Vini, medici e umanisti nel 500," in *et Coquatur ponendo. . . : Cultura della cucina e della tavola in Europa tra Medioevo ed età moderna* (Prato: Istituto Internazionale di Storia Economica "Francesco Datini," 1996). For further reference, see: Andrea Bacci, *De naturali vinorum historia de vinis Italiae et de conuiujs antiquorum libri septem Andreae Baccii. . .* (Rome: ex officina Nicholai Mutis, 1596); and Sante Lancerio, *I vini d'Italia giudicati da papa Paolo III Farnese e dal suo bottigliere Sante Lancerio*, ed. Arturo Celentano (Napoli: La conchiglia, 2004), reprint of the edition edited by Giuseppe Ferraro, originally published: Livorno: Bastogi, 1890. See also: Cesare Biasini Selvaggi, *Degustazioni d'arte: Enologia mitica, spirituale, simbolica e metafisica nelle collezioni pubbliche di Roma* (Rome: Gebart srl, 2003); and Giacomo Sormanni, *Catalogo ragionato delle opere di viticoltura ed enologia pubblicate in Italia o in italiano dal principio della stampa sino a tutto l'anno 1881* (Sala Bolognese: Arnaldo Forni, 1983).

⁵⁴ Albalá, *Eating Right in the Renaissance*, 244-45.

this future sacrifice.⁵⁵ The theme of the marriage at Cana is traditionally understood as a prefiguration of the Eucharistic meal (wine representing blood), and with the symbols of the lamb and hourglass, the artist further expands the religious significance of the scene. The complexity of the compositional structure is undeniable; however, I suggest that the figures comprising a more comprehensive central axis—the two restrained dogs, musicians, Christ, and the carver—underscore the painting's forging of the seemingly disparate worlds of secular banqueting and religious meaning. The two dogs in the immediate foreground, one sitting and one standing, are leashed together. Dogs served as a conventional symbol of fidelity, but comparing these canines to the other unrestrained animals present in the scene (such as the cat clawing the urn and the small dog prancing atop the table on the right side), I argue that these figures serve as further reminders of the importance of decorum—they echo the still poses of Christ and Mary, but in most secular terms.

Continuing upward, the four musicians have been identified as Veronese in white, with Tintoretto (both playing the *viola da braccio*), Jacopo Bassano (playing the flute), and Titian in red (playing the *viola da gamba*).⁵⁶ This self-portrait of Veronese occupies an especially prominent location in the composition, situated on the same axis as Christ. This homage to himself and his colleagues is an unusual inclusion on Veronese's part, and their rich dress certainly indicates a form of self-promotion. For Venetians in particular, music was especially important and was the major form of entertainment in private homes.⁵⁷ In this case, it also brings to mind the Benedictine viewers, eating their daily meals in strict silence while gazing at this painting; perhaps Veronese's telling self-portrait as a musician alludes to the visual symphony that he brought forth for the space of the silent meal. The importance of silence to the Benedictines was tantamount; however, this painting certainly does not evoke a sense of quiet or serenity. Indeed, it might be characterized as "noisy," with the hustle and bustle of the different actors in the performance of the banquet. The prominence of the musicians especially contributes to this sense of noise, sharply contrasting to the actual silence of the

⁵⁵ David Rosand, *Painting in Cinquecento Venice: Titian, Veronese, Tintoretto* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 122. The hourglass refers to an earlier verse in John when Christ tells his mother: "mine hour is not yet come." Rosand has also aptly pointed out that Mary, seated at the right of Christ, is symbolic in her role as the bride of Christ. This signifies the union between the earthly and heavenly church, and their placement at the center of the canvas underscores the importance of this spiritual and celestial marriage.

⁵⁶ Prieuer, 181.

⁵⁷ Brown, *Private Lives in Renaissance Venice*, 123.

refectory space. Perhaps the painting was meant to fill the silence of that austere, quiet room and give the monks fodder for contemplation during their meals. Or it could be seen as a spiritual exercise, as the monks were meant to focus on the quiet and austere figures of Christ and Mary, learning how to block out the “noise” of the material world. Christ is at the epicenter of the composition, a serene point amidst the lively activities surrounding him. While the guests and servers are engaged in the performative gesturing of the banquet, Christ and Mary sit perfectly still, their gazes meeting those of the viewers. Their halos further differentiate them from the other guests and bustling activity around them, as does their markedly austere clothing. The monks might initially have been attracted to the luxury of the banquet but ultimately were to realize that their model was Christ; his iconic stillness would be an appropriately devotional image, and he serves as an exemplar by ignoring the worldly excess around him. With his erect body and direct gaze, the pose and bearing of Christ is like that of a Byzantine icon, a vehicle for meditation. Christ and his mother serve as symbols of both holiness and silence, offering a model for the corresponding behaviors expected of the Benedictine monks.

However, I contend that the figures making up this central axis produce meanings beyond religious symbolism. The carver, or *trinciante* (positioned directly above Christ and Mary), has additional implications, especially when viewed in conjunction with the musicians. A banquet carver’s basic task was to divide and distribute the food—bread, fruit, meat, and fish—and his ritualistic gestures of raising the meat and cutlery high into the air were perfected in the courts of Italy.⁵⁸ Like the other participants in the banquet, his actions were precisely choreographed. The carver was a polished, youthful, handsome man that could combine performance and food service in a most entertaining fashion; he was a central figure at the feast. Several years after the completion of this painting, the first text devoted exclusively to the artful carving of meats, fish, and vegetables was published in Venice. The illustrations included with Vincenzo Cervio’s 1581 text highlight the specialized nature of this position. One woodcut shows essential tools for the position, including a unique fork that grips an egg for carving in the air, and another depicts a turkey and peacock ready for carving [Figure 3]. In the composition of the *Wedding at Cana*, the figure of Veronese as a

⁵⁸ In 1581, the first text devoted exclusively to the artful carving of meats, fish, and vegetables was published in Venice: Vincenzo Cervio, *Il trinciante di Vincenzo Cervio* (Venice, 1581; reprinted, Sala Bolognese: A. Forni, 1980).

musician parallels the carver and his knife in wielding the bow of his viola, indicating a sense of kinship amongst. They are both active creators of the real and imagined banquet. The carver generates the substance of the banquet, while the musicians produce the atmosphere. Veronese certainly might have identified with the carver in his role as designer and master of this elaborate painted banquet, particularly considering the mid-sixteenth century impulse to elevate skills previously considered to be those of a craftsman or artisan to a level enjoyed by the liberal arts. The work of Messisbugo, Romoli, Scappi, and Cervio is paralleled by Giorgio Vasari's almost-simultaneous elevation of the artist, fashioning him as a master rather than artisan.⁵⁹ These authors were aware that paintings would likely be destroyed or lost (as those from antiquity had been), meals would be eaten or discarded, and thus the preservation of these newly elevated arts was of fundamental importance. As the self-appointed scribes recording art and cookery, they also strove to ensure their own eternal fame.

In the *Wedding at Cana*, these musician-artists and banquet officials in turn flank Christ at the center, presented as an iconic focus for the work as the creator and master of mankind. Where the leashed, restrained dogs in the foreground evoke a sense of decorum, the figures of Veronese, the musician, and the carver allude to the luxury of this feast and the professional, masterful skill needed to produce it. Christ and Mary's religious significance is further underscored by the inclusion of the carver who symbolizes sacrifice, but in decisively sixteenth century terms. The shifting dialogues inherent in the work both coalesce and collide in these figures comprising the central axis. Veronese's painting employs the language of banquets and their protocol to create a scene that balances the secular and the religious, the real and the symbolic, the luxurious and the restrained—it is an image that would appeal to a lay audience, yet also prove devotional for a monastic one. The refectory, through architecture and painting, ultimately expresses both the religious and secular power of the monastery. Especially when considered in its original social and architectural context, Veronese's painted banquet, eternally preserved in crisp detail and vivid color, was carefully designed to surpass the ephemeral banquets of the outside world.

⁵⁹ Giorgio Vasari, *The Lives of the Artists*, trans. Julia Conaway Bondanella and Peter Bondanella (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 1991). The first edition of Vasari's *Lives* was published in 1550; a revised and expanded version came in 1568.

ILLUSTRATIONS

(See online version for illustrations)

Figure 1: Paolo Veronese, *The Wedding at Cana*, 1562-63. Oil on canvas. 6.77 x 9.94 m. The Louvre Museum, Paris, France.

Figure 2: Christoforo Messisbugo, *Banchetti compositioni di vivande, et apparecchio generale*, 1539. Giovanni del Buglhat e Antonio Hucher Compagni, Ferrara, Italy.

Figure 3: Vincenzo Cervio, *Il trinciante di Vincenzo Cervio*, 1593. Giulio Burchioni e Tipografia Gabania, Rome, Italy.